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## ABSTRACT

This pamphlet answers four basic questions: (1) What is known about working mothers in North Carolina? (2) What is known about child care arrangements in the state? (3) Are regional differences in maternal employment and child care important? (4) What do the answers to these questions reveal about public policies that could improve the well-being of families and children in North Carolina? Data indicate that very large numbers of mothers with young children are employed in the state and that their children need care. The number of preschool-age children has increased. Employment levels among women in all social groups have increased, but employment opportunities for women and men vary dramatically from county to county. The availability of licensed child care also varies from county to county. Availability appears more closely related to per capita income than to need as measured by female employment. Low wage rates often make it necessary for both husband and wife to work to support a family. Many families, even those with two wage-earners, cannot afford high quality child care. Affordability and quality of child care are especially problematic for female-headed households, because women, on the average, earn less than men. Recommendations for social policy are offered. (RH)

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MOTHERS  
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CHILD  
CARE  
IN  
NORTH  
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## **WORKING MOTHERS AND CHILD CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA**

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**Copies of this pamphlet are available at a nominal cost. Further information is available by calling (919) 962-7363.**

# **WORKING MOTHERS AND CHILD CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA**

## **MAJOR FINDINGS**

**Very large numbers of mothers with young children are employed in North Carolina, and their children need care. The number of preschool aged children has also increased. These are the two basic reasons that existing childcare services are strained.**

**Employment levels among women in all social groups have increased, but employment opportunities for both women and men vary dramatically from county to county.**

**The availability of licensed child care also varies from county to county. Availability appears more closely related to per capita income than to need as measured by female employment.**

**Low wage rates often make it necessary that both husband and wife work to support a family, and many families even with two wage-earners cannot afford quality child care.**

**Affordability and quality of child care are especially serious problems for female-headed households because women, on the average, earn less than men.**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Efforts should be made to increase the availability of child care. More licensed and registered care is needed in virtually every county of North Carolina. Particular attention must be paid to expanding services and developing high quality programs for infants and toddlers.**

**Because the availability of child care and the level of maternal employment vary from one county to another, efforts to expand childcare services should be tailored to meet the specific needs of local areas. Employment rates should be reported by sex, so that regional development activity benefits both women and men.**

**Economic development programs should encourage employment opportunities for both women and men and provide child care for parents with young children. These measures are necessary if the gap between rich and poor counties in the state is to be reduced.**

**Finally, a special evaluation of childcare should focus on the special needs of poor and moderate income families in North Carolina. Services for infants and toddlers is another issue in need of immediate attention.**

# WORKING MOTHERS AND CHILD CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA

This pamphlet answers four basic questions:

What do we know about working mothers in North Carolina?

What do we know about childcare arrangements within the state?

Are regional differences in maternal employment and child care important?

What does this information tell us about public policies that could improve the well being of families and children in North Carolina?

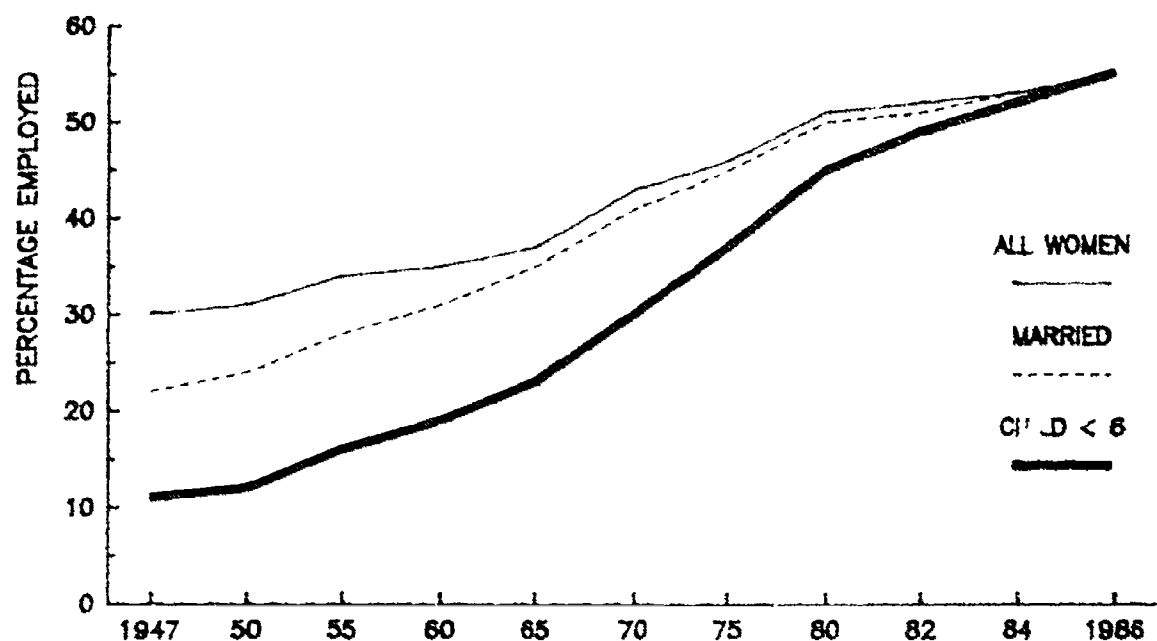
## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WORKING MOTHERS?

### NATIONAL TRENDS

In the United States, there has been a steep rise in female labor force participation. Historically, it was common for women to work until the birth of their first child, leave the labor force to concentrate on childrearing, and return in lesser numbers when the youngest child entered school. Women without children and mothers who were separated, divorced, or widowed worked in higher percentages than married mothers. This pattern changed after World War II, and employment patterns of women in different family situations became more similar. Figure 1 summarizes national trends.

Figure 1

Female Labor Force Participation Rates  
United States, 1947-1986



Sources: Wattenberg, 1976:133; US Bureau of the Census, 1986:383.

## MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

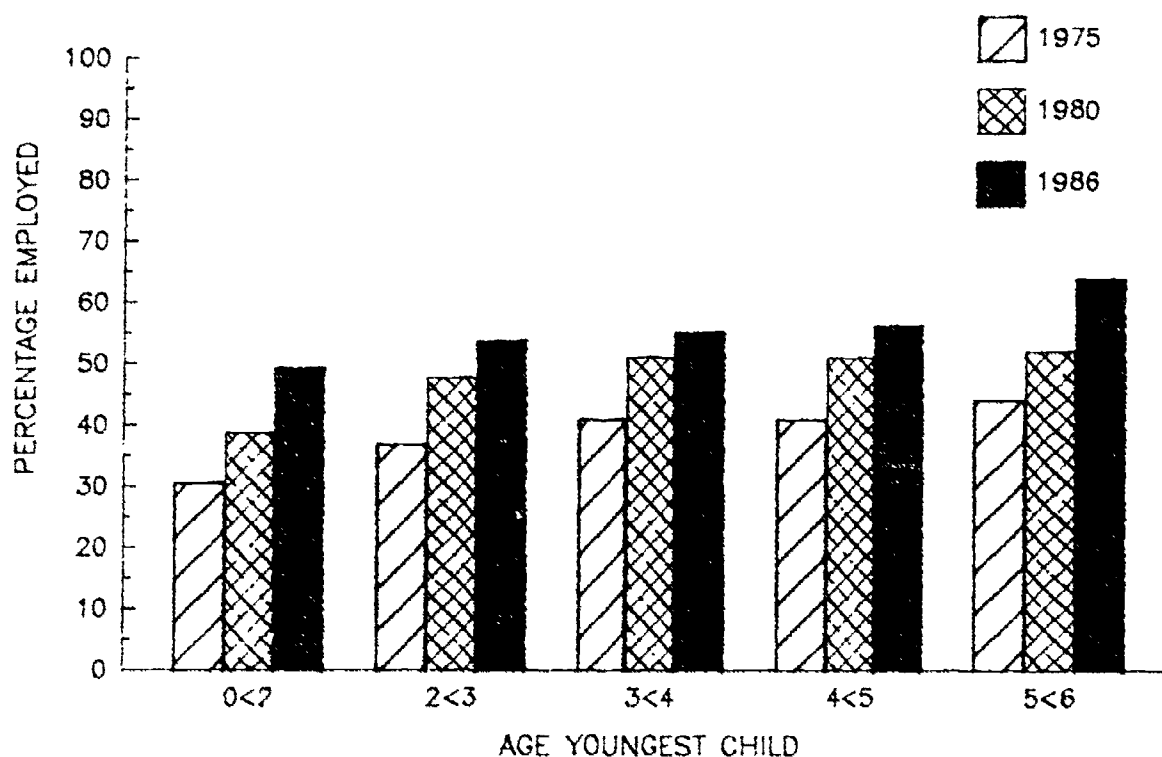
For all women, labor force participation increased from 30% in 1947 to 55% in 1986. This change basically reflects the behavior of married women, who are the largest category of adult women. In 1947, the labor force participation rate for married women was far below the levels for all women; by 1984, there was no difference.

Among married women, the most dramatic increase in working wives occurred among mothers of preschoolers. The proportion of employed mothers with children under six increased fivefold—from 11% in 1948 to 55% in 1986. By 1986 there was actually no difference in the employment rates of married mothers with children under six and all women. This means that large numbers of mothers are no longer waiting for the youngest child to begin elementary school before reentering the labor market.

This change is recent, as Figure 2 illustrates. For all age groups, maternal employment increased dramatically between 1975 and 1986. Mothers of "older" preschoolers work in higher proportions than those with younger children. Nevertheless, the labor force participation of mothers with infants increased from 24% in 1970 to 51% in 1987 (O'Connell and Bloom, 1987:4). Most mothers work full time.

Figure 2

Employment of Currently Married Mothers  
With Child(ren) < 6 by Age of Youngest:  
United States, 1975-1986



Source: US Bureau of the Census, 1986:383.

## TRENDS IN NORTH CAROLINA

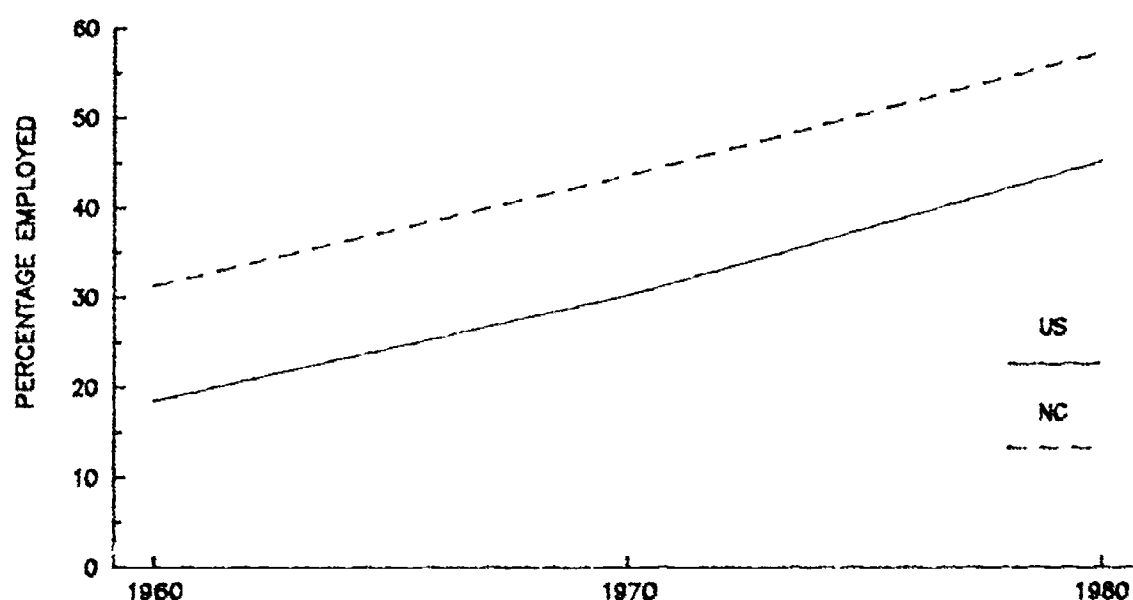
Finally, there are many women of childbearing age. Although they have small families, they produce large numbers of young children. They also work in record numbers. Consequently, there were approximately one million more infants with working mothers in 1986 than in 1976 (US Bureau of the Census, 1988:4).

Taken together, there are several important consequences of these national trends for child care. The proportion of children needing care while mother works has increased. The age of children needing care has declined, and the total number of children needing care has increased. The interaction of all three factors is what strains the childcare delivery system.

The trend in female employment within North Carolina is basically similar to the nation. Traditionally, high proportions of women worked because male wages were low and jobs were available for women in agriculture, textiles, and domestic service. Overall female employment rates, however, run only slightly above the national average. This conceals the fact that women with children under six have labor force participation rates which are well above national levels. Figure 3 illustrates this trend. In 1980, for example, the majority (57%) of mothers in North Carolina with children under six were employed, a figure fully 12% above the national average. These numbers mean that the generally high rates of female labor force participation characteristic of the state are chiefly attributable to the employment of mothers with young children.

Figure 3

Female Labor Force Participation  
Married Women with Children < 6 Years Old  
United States and North Carolina, 1960-1980



Sources: Wattenberg, 1976:383; US Bureau of the Census, 1961:403; 1970:628, 1980:76; 1986:383.

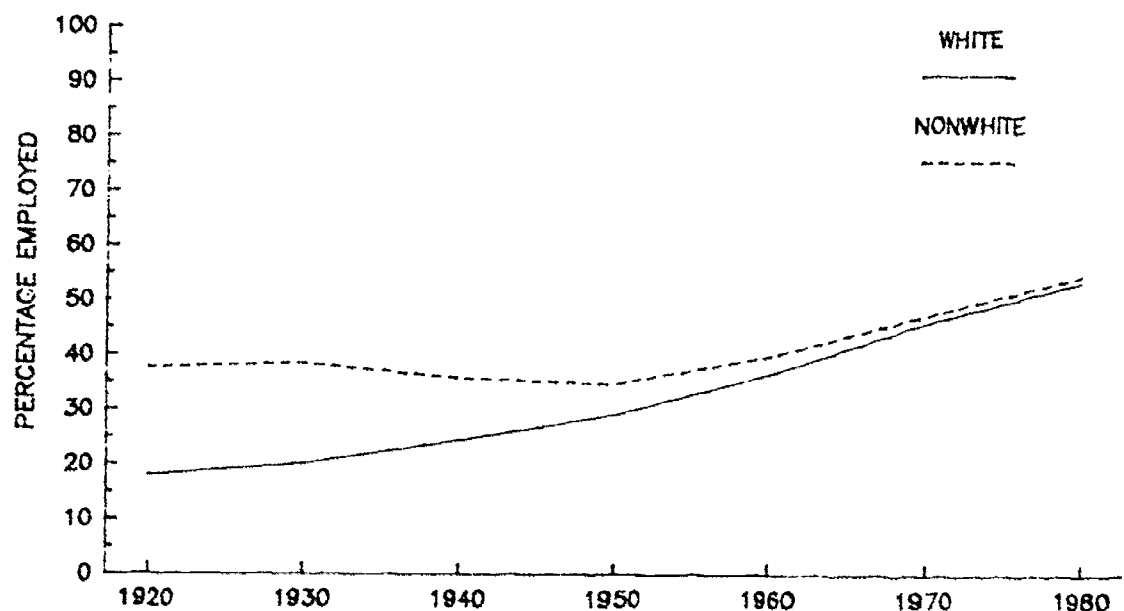
**Mothers in North Carolina with children under six work in substantially higher proportions than their counterparts in the United States as a whole. Consequently, a high proportion of families need care for preschoolers while mother works.**

## ETHNICITY

Maternal employment levels also vary by social group. North Carolina has a substantial black population, which represents approximately 25% of the state. Black women traditionally have higher employment rates than white women, but change is occurring, as Figure 4 shows. In 1920, black women in North Carolina had employment rates fully 20% above those of white women. By 1980, this gap had been reduced to 1%. Both black and white women have increased their labor force participation, but the change has been larger for whites. State data are particularly dramatic, but there are parallels at the national level.

**Figure 4**

**Female Labor Force Participation by Race:  
North Carolina, 1920-1980**



**Sources: US Bureau of the Census. North Carolina  
1943:529; 1952:208-209; 1961:403-406;  
1973:628-631; 1983:76-77.**

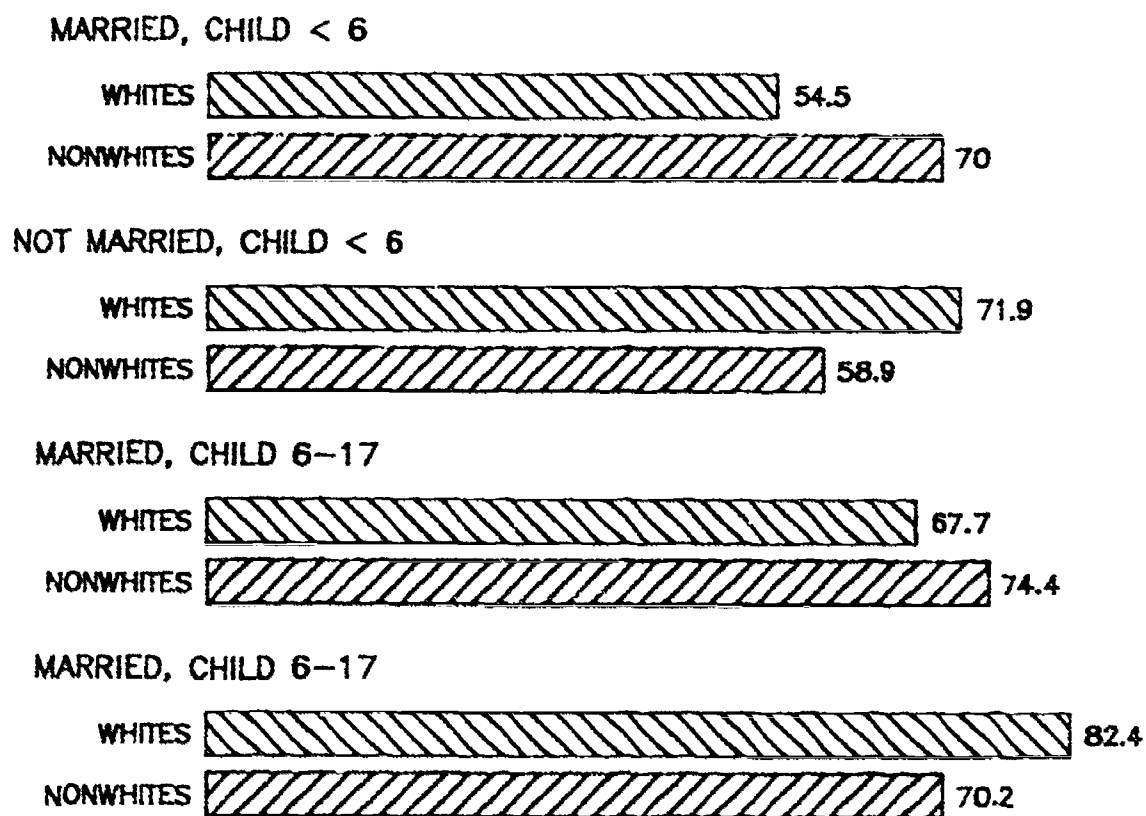
## MARITAL STATUS

Marital status is also important, as Figure 5 illustrates. A black woman in North Carolina who is currently married and living with spouse is more likely than her white counterpart to be employed, even if her child is under six. A white mother, by contrast, is more likely to be employed if she is not currently married. That is, age of youngest child and marital status of mother have different consequences for the employment of white and black women. This finding is consistent with national data (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986).



**Figure 5**

**Female Labor Force Participation  
by Race, Marital Status, and Age of Child:  
North Carolina, 1980**

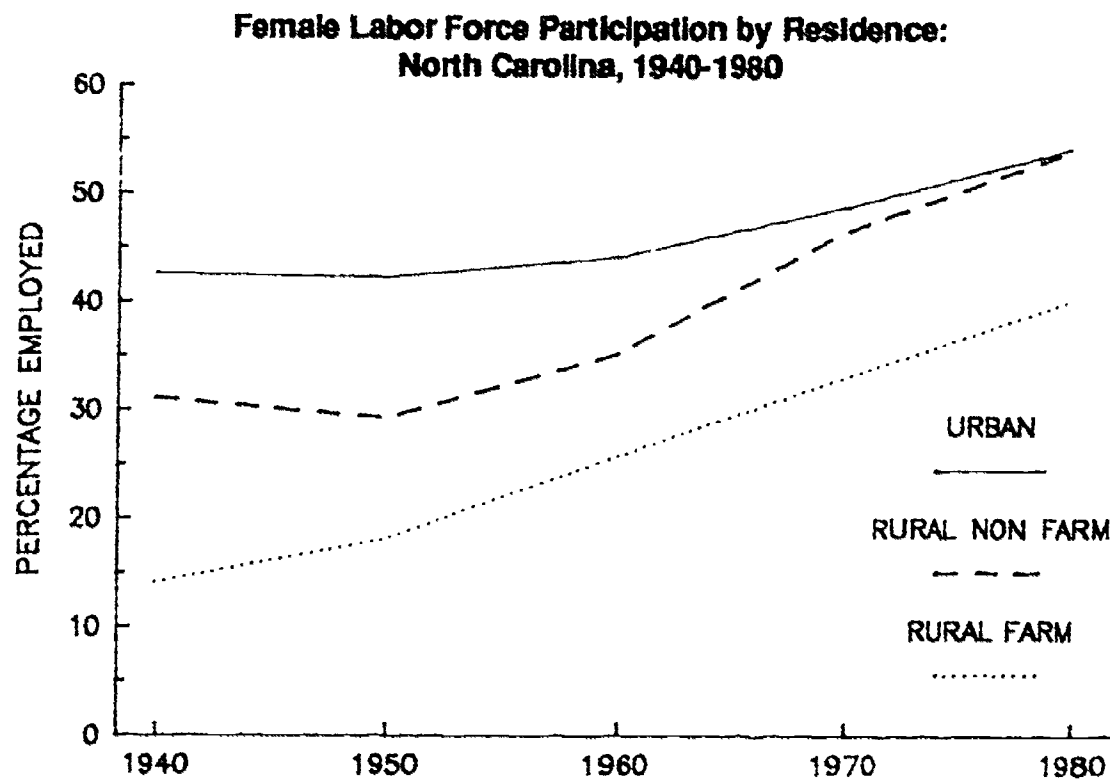


**SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, 1982: Table 77.**

**URBAN/RURAL  
RESIDENCE**

Finally, differences by urban/rural residence are also important, as Figure 6 illustrates. Urban women have traditionally had higher employment rates than their rural counterparts, but employment among rural women has increased. The gap between the employment levels of urban and rural non-farm women has virtually disappeared, while that between urban and rural farm women is substantially reduced. Urban/rural differences are, therefore, declining, as rural employment rates approximate those in urban areas.

Figure 6



Sources: US Bureau of the Census, 1943:529; 1952:208;  
1963:403; 1973:628; 1982:76.

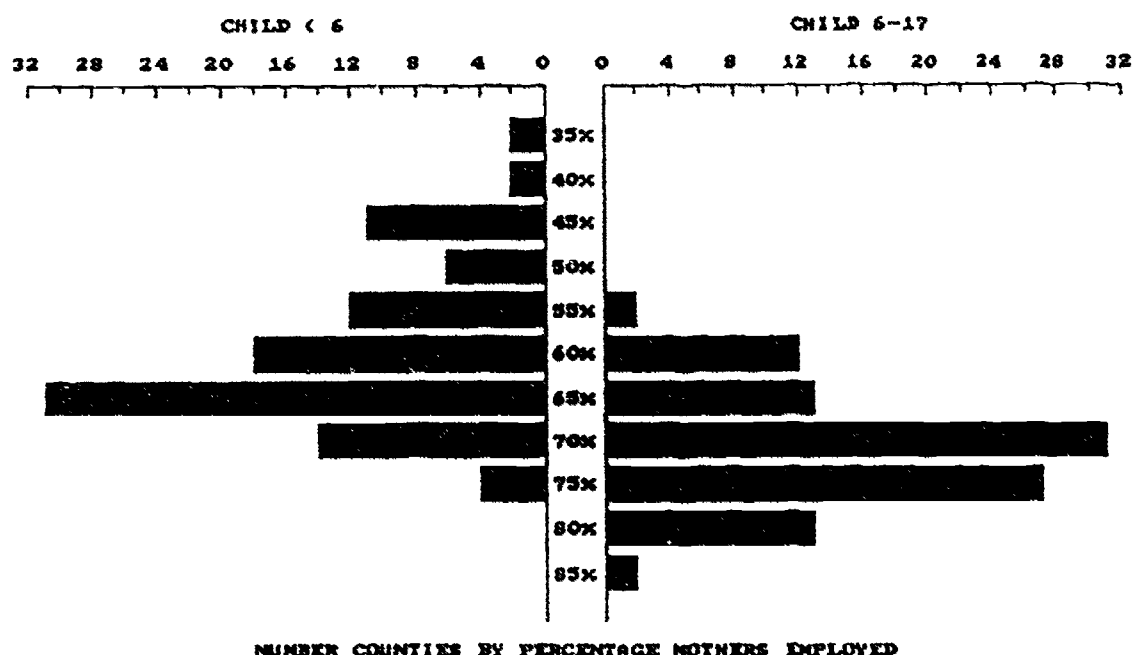
In general, state level data suggest that female employment patterns have become more homogeneous over time. Historical differences are no longer as marked between blacks and whites, urban and rural residents, married and unmarried women, and mothers with younger or older children. **The basic trend in North Carolina is that women in many different situations are working in higher proportions today than they were in the past.**

## COUNTY-LEVEL DIFFERENCES

Despite these trends at the state level, important differences persist at the county level. In most of North Carolina's 100 counties, majority of mothers with children under 18 work. Generally high levels of employment prevail among mothers with school-age children. As the left side of Figure 7 illustrates, 70% or more of mothers with school-age children in most North Carolina counties are employed. There is variation by county, but the distribution leans towards high levels of female employment. With regard to mothers of preschoolers, the range is broader. As the right side of Figure 7 illustrates, there are two counties in which fewer than 35% of mothers with preschoolers were employed in 1980; in five counties, the comparable rate was 75%. **This means that the needs of working mothers for preschool childcare vary dramatically from one county to another.**

**Figure 7**

**Distribution of North Carolina Counties  
by Percentage of Working Mothers  
with Youngest < 6 and 6-17: 1980**



**Source: North Carolina, 1985:77-78.**

Regional variation in maternal employment can be displayed on a state map. The percentage of mothers with children under six who are in the labor force is illustrated in **Map 1** at the end of this pamphlet. In very general terms, low employment levels are concentrated along the coast and in the mountains, both poor areas of the state. High employment levels are concentrated in the Piedmont and along the crescent which is the traditional urban and manufacturing belt. Employment levels reflect the history of specific counties and the characteristics of their economies. Consequently, it is difficult to capture the diverse but important factors which are associated with county-level variation.

**WHAT EXPLAINS  
REGIONAL  
DIFFERENCES?**

Statistical analysis can advance our understanding. Two basic questions can be posed: Which variables are strongly associated with female labor force participation? How much variation in female labor force participation can be explained by a short and sensible list of variables? More information on data analysis is available from the author.

There are several factors which are important in explaining how maternal employment varies across counties: the overall unemployment rate in the county; per capita levels of transfer payments (e.g. social security, welfare payments, etc.); the relative importance of manufacturing; the proportion of female-headed households, and the proportion of the population living below the official poverty line. Taking into account

the influence of other variables in the model, the following relationships emerge. Where maternal employment is high, unemployment rates and transfer payments tend to be low. Also, where maternal employment is high, manufacturing is important and there are many female-headed households. Finally, high rates of female employment are associated with low proportions of persons living in poverty.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

These results have important implications for regional economic development. National data clearly demonstrate that two earner families have higher average incomes than one earner families. Consequently, if both male and female heads of house in "job rich" counties work, the standard of living in these counties will continue to increase. The analysis of North Carolina data demonstrate that low levels of female employment are associated with limited opportunities for both women and men. If neither male nor female heads of house in "job poor" counties work, the standard of living in those counties will decrease. Under these circumstances, the gap between affluent and poor regions in the state will increase and regional inequalities will become more pronounced. In order to decrease disparities between rich and poor counties, economic development programs must enhance employment opportunities for both women and men.

## **WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDCARE ARRANGEMENTS?**

Is there a relationship between maternal employment and child care? An obvious answer is yes. Because childrearing is a task typically assigned to women and because proportionally more mothers are employed, more families today need extra-parental child care. Moreover, because more women are employed there are fewer relatives (grandmothers, aunts, etc.) to care for the children of working mothers. Finally, because relatives are not available, many mothers rely on extra-familial care. If family daycare homes and/or daycare centers are unavailable, women may be unable to work. If available programs are of poor quality, women may decide to forgo employment and care for children themselves.

The relationship between employment and child care is complex, and our understanding is limited. County-level data on female employment is available only every ten years from the census. Between the censuses, data are collected by gender, but neither the state nor the federal government makes county-level figures available. Consequently, out-of-date employment data must be related to contemporary childcare information, simply because data managers refuse to come to grips with the contemporary reality of female employment.

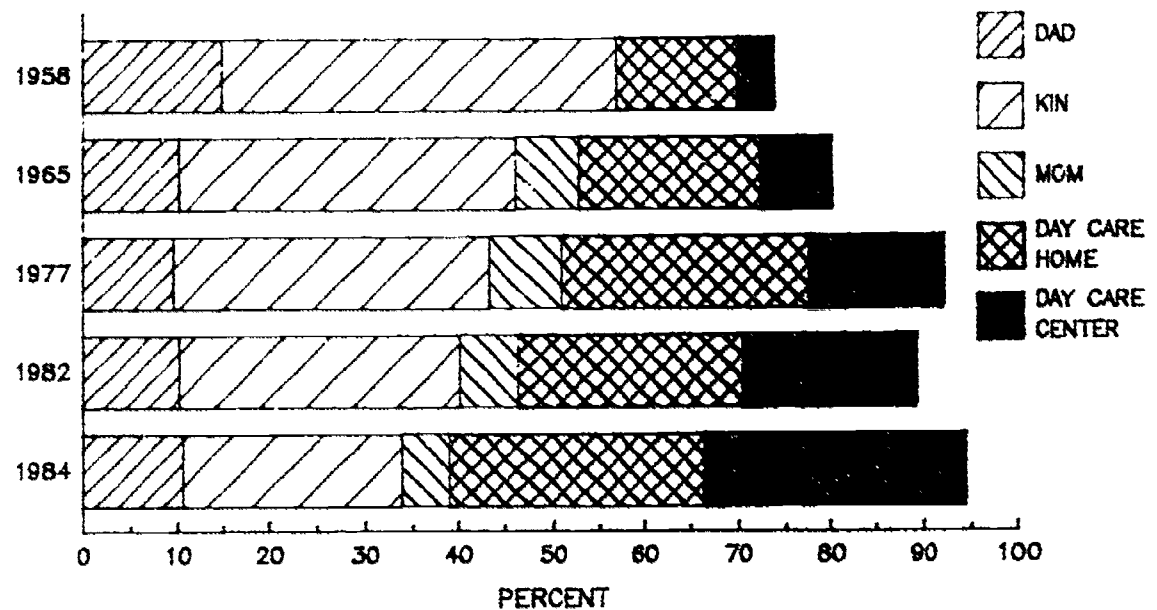
## **NATIONAL TRENDS IN CHILDCARE ARRANGEMENTS**

Information on childcare arrangements is generally not as good as data on female employment, so there are serious problems in generating a time line reflective of national trends. Nevertheless, data from Census Bureau surveys can be assembled and recalculated to enhance comparability (Garrett and Lubeck, 1988). Figure 8 presents a national overview of changes in the principal childcare arrangements of full-time working mothers. Among full time workers, there has been a substantial increase in the relative importance of family daycare homes and daycare centers between 1958 and 1984.



**Figure 8**

**Child Care Arrangements for Preschoolers  
of Mothers Employed Full Time:  
1958-1984**



**Sources: Lajewski, 1959; Low and Spindler, 1968;  
US Bureau of the Census, 1982; 1983; 1987.**

National data indicate that childcare arrangements vary systematically with certain maternal characteristics, notably marital and employment status. Age of child is also a critical factor. As Figure 8 illustrates, primary childcare arrangements vary over time and by age of child. Historically, parents selected family-based settings for younger children and group-based settings for older preschoolers. In very recent years, however, there has been a dramatic increase in group-based settings for infants and toddlers. Nevertheless, with regard to "older" preschoolers, group-based arrangements have been consistently popular.

**CHILD CARE IN  
NORTH CAROLINA**

State-wide data comparable to these national figures are not available, but information was obtained from the Child Day Care Section of the NC Department of Human Resources. The list included all licensed daycare centers and registered family daycare providers, plus the number of children that the facility was authorized to serve. These data were analyzed to answer several important questions.

## **HOW MUCH IS THERE?**

**How much child care is licensed or registered in North Carolina?** As of October, 1987, there were 161,259 slots. This is licensed/registered capacity, a figure which is typically higher than the number of slots actually used. While this figure overestimates availability, slots were technically available for approximately one-third of children under five.

The vast majority (85%) of these slots were in centers. On the basis of national data, one would expect high proportions of children, especially infants and toddlers, to be cared for in family daycare homes. The fact that only 15% of slots are in registered homes supports the interpretation that most home-based care in North Carolina is unregulated.

## **WHERE IS IT LOCATED?**

**How available is licensed daycare across the state?** To estimate per capita availability, the number of center slots was divided by the number of children under five in each county (Holdrich, 1986). There is substantial variation in childcare availability across the state, as Map 2 at the end of the pamphlet illustrates. It ranges from a low in Camden County of 6.3 slots for every 100 children under five to a high of 68.8 in Orange County. This means that in the least favorable situation, licensed/registered slots were available for less than 10% of children under five. In the most favorable situation, slots were available for about two-thirds of preschoolers.

## **WHAT EXPLAINS DIFFERENCES IN AVAILABILITY?**

**What explains different levels of availability across counties?** In order to answer this question, statistical analyses were conducted. Detailed results are available from the author, but two findings are particularly important.

Need, as measured by female employment and female headed households, is not closely associated with the availability of child care. When the influence of other variables is taken into account, per capita income has the strongest net impact on the availability of licensed childcare slots. This means that, after other important factors have been taken into consideration, **rich counties have significantly greater availability of child care than poor counties.**

## **MAPS AT END OF PAMPHLET**

It is possible to see some of these results in Maps 1 and 2 at the end of this pamphlet. By comparing the same counties across both maps, it becomes clear that a county with high female employment does not necessarily have high childcare availability. In many cases, however, counties with low employment have low availability. This observation raises the next question.

## **TYPES OF COUNTY-LEVEL SITUATIONS**

**What relationships exist between maternal employment and per capita availability of child care?** In order to answer this question, counties were sorted by the 1980 labor force participation rates of mothers with children under six. Three groups were created. Then counties were sorted by estimated per capita availability of child care during 1986-1987. Three more groups were created. Finally, the maternal employment and childcare groupings were crossed to produce a typology of the different situations which exist in the state. The results are summarized in Figure 9.

This figure shows that the supply of licensed daycare is generally inadequate across the state. The rates at which women with young children are employed are generally higher than the per capita availability of daycare slots. There are only 20 counties with slots available for 30% or more of children under five. By contrast, there are 50 counties with maternal employment rates of 60% or more in 1980, a figure which would doubtless be higher today. **The poor relationship between rates of childcare availability and maternal employment means that the overall supply of licensed daycare is inadequate.**

Figure 9

**NORTH CAROLINA COUNTIES GROUPED BY  
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES OF WOMEN  
WITH CHILD(REN) UNDER 6  
AND ESTIMATED PER CAPITA AVAILABILITY OF CHILD CARE**

**MATERNAL  
EMPLOYMENT  
RATES**

**PER CAPITA AVAILABILITY OF CHILD CARE**

	<20%		20<30%	30%+
<50	Beaufort Brunswick Camden Chowan Craven Gates Graham	Hyde Madison Onslow Pamlico Perquimans Washington	Carteret Cumberland Currituck Haywood Henderson Transylvania	Dare
50<60%	Bertie Bladen Columbus Duplin Greene Halifax Harnett Hertford Jones	Northampton Pender Person Polk Warren Yancey	Buncombe Clay Jackson Macon Nash Pasquotank Watauga Wayne Wilson	Mecklenberg New Hanover Pitt Swain Tyrrell Wake
60%+	Alexander Anson Ashe Avery Caswell Chatham Cherokee Cleveland Granville Hoke Iredell McDowell Rockingham Rutherford		Alleghany Burke Cabarrus Caldwell Davie Edgecombe Franklin Lenoir Lincoln Martin Mitchell Moore Randolph Richmond	Robeson Rowan Sampson Scotland Stanly Stokes Union Wilkes Yadkin  Alamance Catawba Davidson Durham Forsyth Gaston Guilford Johnston Lee Montgomery Orange Surry Vance

Corrected January, 1989

The figure also demonstrates that the relationship between maternal employment and childcare availability varies across the state. The 50 counties with very high rates of maternal employment had varying access to childcare. In 14 of these counties, licensed capacity was for fewer than 20% of preschoolers. Another 23 could accommodate less than 30%, while the remaining 13 had capacity for 30% or more of preschoolers. The need for child care is more acute in certain areas, but in virtually all counties with high maternal employment, the need for child care far exceeds the supply of slots in licensed centers. **This means that programs to enhance the availability of child care, especially in counties with high rates of maternal employment, would be beneficial.**

Counties with low levels of female employment also exhibit differences. In 20 counties, the labor force participation rates of mothers with children under six were less than 50% in 1980. They are predominantly rural. Only seven of them had a licensed per capita capacity of 20% or more of preschoolers; 13 had licensed capacity for fewer than 20% of preschoolers. Most counties characterized by low female employment and low childcare availability are located in the eastern coastal region. In such regions, it will not be possible to incorporate women into the work force and thereby reduce poverty unless daycare services are expanded. **Programs to foster the economic development of disadvantaged regions should incorporate child care as a component of regional planning.**

### **WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR SOCIAL POLICY?**

#### **CHILD CARE IS A PRESSING ISSUE**

This overview of working mothers and child care in North Carolina demonstrates that policymakers face a complex issue. There are important similarities between trends at the national and state levels, but there are also features which make North Carolina special. In terms of maternal employment, the single most important factor is the labor force participation of mothers with children under six. High levels of maternal employment place special demands on the childcare delivery system. **This means that childcare policies, especially as they affect preschoolers, are more pressing issues in North Carolina than in many other states.**

#### **POOR COMMUNITIES HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS**

High rates of maternal employment create a need for child care, which is particularly intense in certain regions of the state. Nevertheless, neither maternal employment nor the incidence of female headed households are good predictors of the per capita availability of licensed child care. County-level need and availability correspond poorly. To explain availability of child care, taking into account the impact of other variables in the model, the most powerful predictor is per capita income. **This means that affluent communities provide relatively more child care per capita than poorer communities.**

#### **REGIONAL VARIATION IS IMPORTANT**

There is variation in both maternal employment and childcare availability across the state. It is generally true that the quantity of child care is less than the amount needed, if this is estimated by the percentage of mothers with young children in the work force. More important is the fact that variation by county and region is pronounced. **This means that programs to enhance female employment and improve childcare services must be tailored to regional realities.**



**PROGRAMS SHOULD  
BE TAILORED TO  
MEET LOCAL NEEDS**

Programs to increase families' standard of living and to improve the quality of care provided children must reflect regional differences. Variation in both employment and child care need to be taken explicitly into account. This means that policies developed at the state level should permit regions and counties to meet general objectives by developing programs tailored to specific situations.

**AFFORDABILITY IS  
A SERIOUS PROBLEM**

Finally, there is a correspondence between economic and family policy that should be recognized. One relationship is critical. Economic policies which encourage low-wage employment also encourage dual-earner families. North Carolina is traditionally a low wage state, and low male wages encourage high rates of female labor force participation. Women's work generally pays poorly, but in this state many male jobs also pay poorly. This means that many families, even some with two workers, need child care which they actually cannot afford. In female-headed households, the problem of affordability is generally more serious because women, on the average, earn wages substantially below those of men.

**POOR AND MODERATE  
INCOME FAMILIES  
HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS  
THAT PUBLIC POLICY  
SHOULD ADDRESS**

Mothers who need to work in order to support their families are fundamentally different from those who prefer to work. Working mothers in North Carolina are not a single group, and social policy must recognize this reality. One important role for public policy is to intervene on behalf of relatively disadvantaged mothers and to demand high levels of performance for programs serving disadvantaged groups. Low and moderate income families have special needs for child care. Several issues deserve special consideration. The availability of programs to poor children is important, as is the affordability of child care, especially for families with modest incomes. Finally, the quality of child care, especially as it varies by availability and affordability, is critical. This means that a special evaluation of childcare programs should focus on the needs of poor and moderate income families and children in North Carolina.

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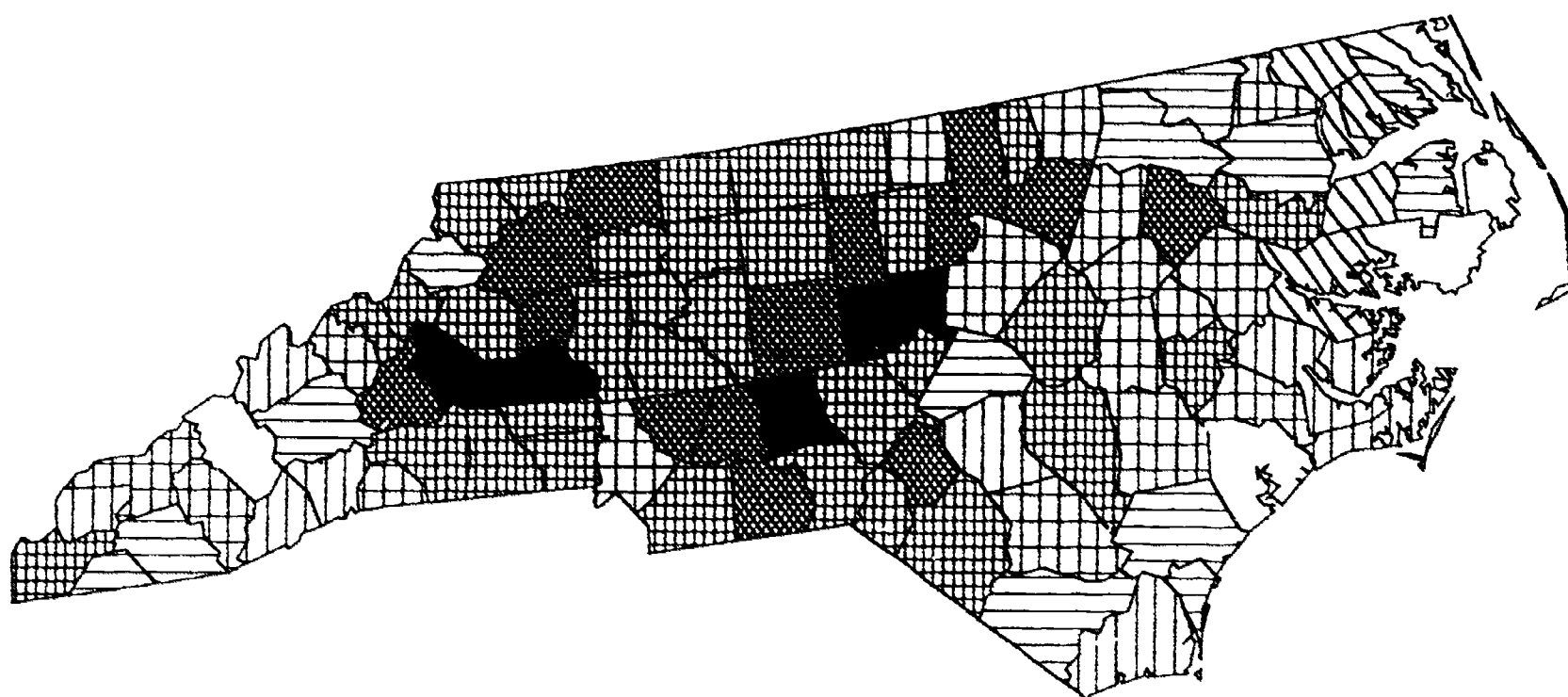
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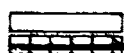
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# EMPLOYMENT RATES OF WOMEN WITH CHILDREN <6: NORTH CAROLINA, 1980



23

% EMPLOYED



<40%  
55<60%



40<45%  
60<65%



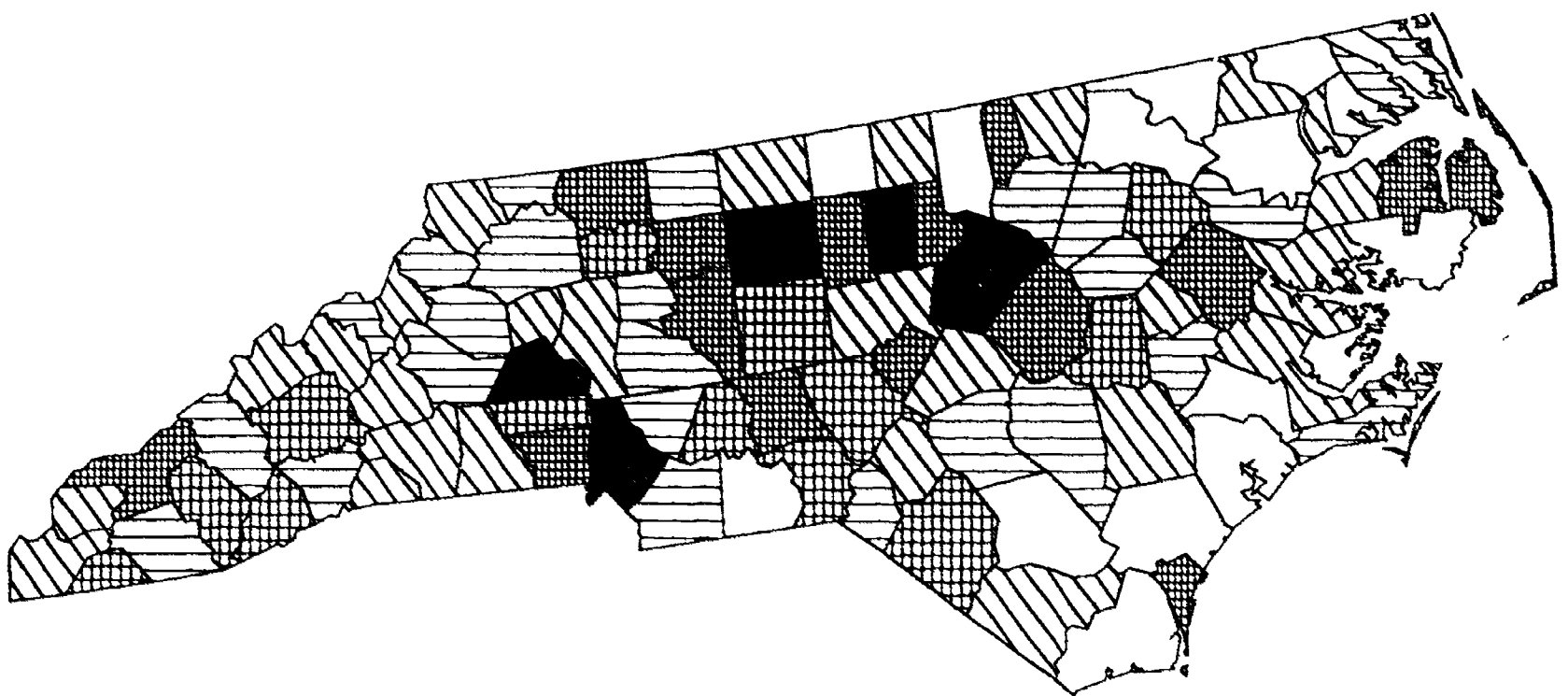
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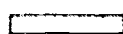





# LICENSED DAYCARE SLOTS PER CHILD <5: NORTH CAROLINA, 1986-1987

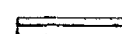



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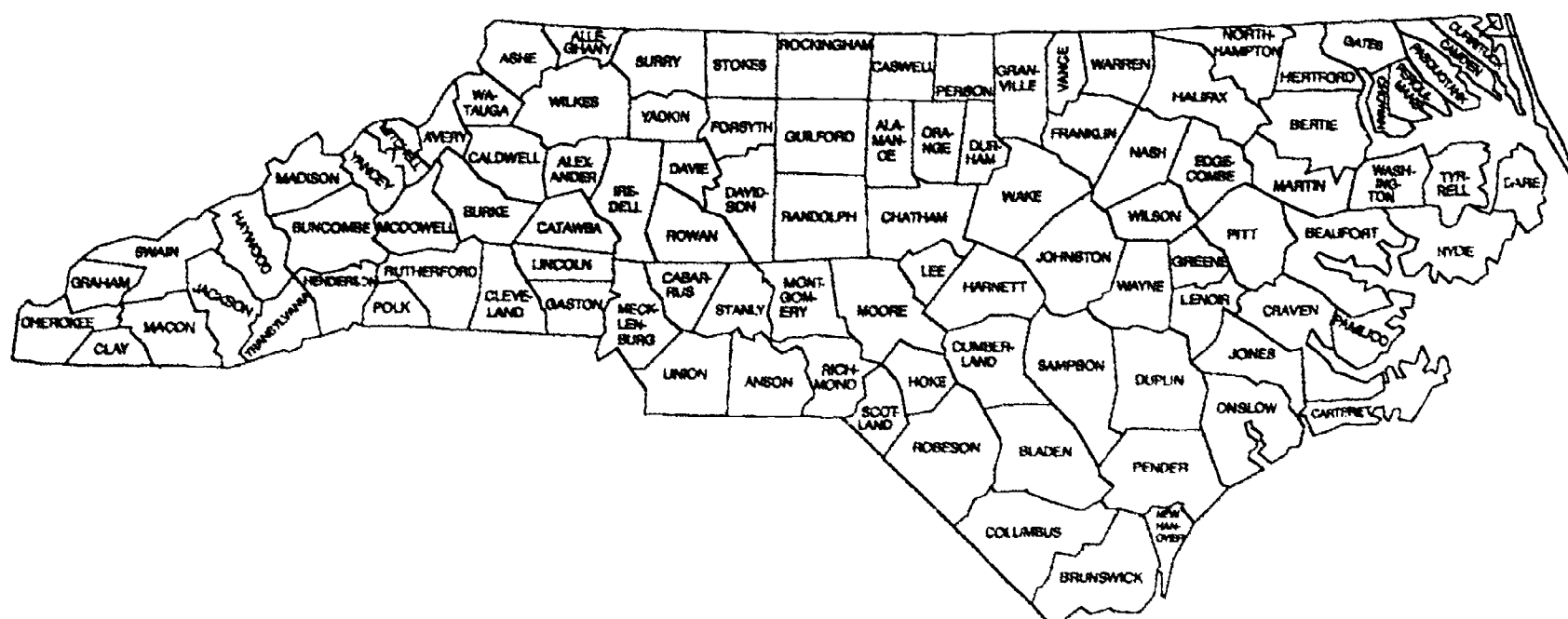
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